



# The Youth Industrial Complex

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**Synopsis:** *In the context of decreased support for young people throughout society, it is vital to understand the forces driving the changes underway. The writer identifies and analyzes a phenomenon called the youth-industrial complex that situates the relationships between businesses, governments and nonprofits, as well as the functions between public and private resources, and youth activities. Acknowledging the history and future of the phenomenon, the writer suggests this becomes core knowledge among people within and affected by the complex.*

The nonprofit industrial complex affects billions of people worldwide, benefiting and detracting from our efforts to make change all while appearing innocuous and indifferent. Because of their age and role in society though, young people might be the most heinously affected. Their experience is so finitely affected that I am calling it the youth-industrial complex. The youth-industrial complex is a phenomenon in the United States that summarizes the overlapping interests of nonprofits, businesses and government agencies which use public and private resources to create youth-serving activities to address economic, social and political problems.

## What It Does

The youth-industrial complex is reflected in the relationship between the three components of governments, nonprofits and businesses. These activities reinforce each sectors' mutually beneficial interactions with young people. Each individual component gains from addressing specific problems in society with specific activities for youth, while the other two aspects gain from ensuring young people have those specific problems in the first place.

Every single young person is affected by this complex in countless visible and invisible ways, extending from their home lives to sports, schooling to hanging out; from technology to clothing, music to communication. So many aspects of young peoples' lives are touched upon by the entwined, non-linear forces of the youth-industrial complex that it can be hard to identify exactly what it is.



Identity segregation, rather than intersectionality, is key to the youth-industrial complex. Youth are frequently identified by governments, nonprofits and businesses by way of their age, sexuality, class, ethnicity, race, and gender, in addition to geographic location, family status, academic achievement and more. In business, each identity is addressed as a potential "market segment" with products, advertising and pricing that are targeted specifically at them. In governments, identities may appear less segmented, but still have programs, activities, policies and policing targeted at them. The very existence of many youth-serving nonprofits is based on youth identities. This specification reinforces the appearance and realities of youth diversity; ironically, it both supports and challenges the very institutions addressing youth to become more effective.

## What It Is

As already identified, the youth-industrial complex is comprised of three components: Businesses, nonprofits and governments. Each of these components itself is made of several layers. **Businesses** include large corporations and sole entrepreneurs; direct sales and consultants; marketers and social media; curriculum designers, program developers and assessors; lobbyists and gaming; clothing and counseling; and any other profit-oriented transaction. **Nonprofits** include all sorts of formal and informal activities that build, foster and otherwise change communities at the local, regional, state, national and international levels, including social services such as community education, food subsidies, healthcare, job training and supported housing, and adoption. **Governments** are systems that operate to organize local, state, national and international groups of people. The three leading parts of government include the legislature, executive, and judiciary on all levels, and their activities include policing, education, public utilities, general administration, streets and roads, and sanitation. There can be many other activities of each of these components of the youth-industrial complex.

The youth-industrial complex can be identified in several subsequent relationships:

- [Education industrial complex](#)
- [Sports industrial complex](#)
- [Youth police industrial complex](#)
- [Juvenile justice industrial complex](#)
- [Video game industrial complex](#)
- [Music industrial complex](#)
- [Voting industry complex](#)
- [Child welfare industrial complex](#)

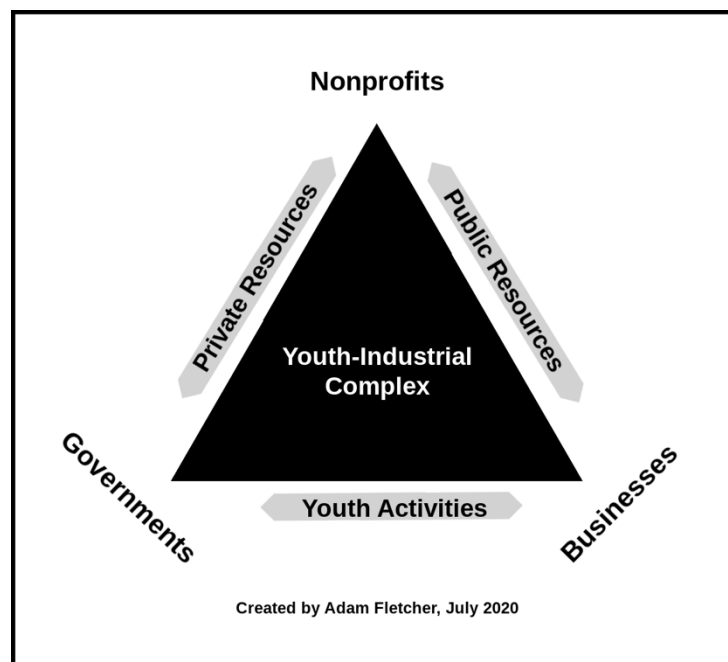
One of my mentors, Henry A. Giroux, once wrote how,

*...the popular demonization of the young now justifies responses to youth that were unthinkable 20 years ago, including criminalization and imprisonment, the prescription of psychotropic drugs, psychiatric confinement, and zero tolerance policies that model schools after prisons. School has become a model for a punishing society in which children who violate a rule as minor as a dress code infraction or act out slightly in class can be handcuffed, booked and put in a jail cell.*

—from “[Disposable Youth in a Suspect Society](#)” by Henry A. Giroux (2008) for Truthout (2008).

While Giroux addresses the specific neoliberal aspects of the youth-industrial complex, in this article I'm interested in the overarching aspects of this reality. In addition to its dominance over their democratic potential, the youth-industrial complex functions as the tool of absolute adult dominance over young people. This means it wholly disallows their innate human rights, let alone their specific rights as children and youth.

## How It Acts



The intricate and interwoven actions within the youth-industrial complex can be summarized as an "iron triangle," illustrated above. This "iron triangle" of the youth-industrial complex



represents six elements of all youth services in the United States. Nonprofits, governments and businesses were previously explained. **Youth activities** include every type of activity that serves young people in our society, from consumerism to volunteerism; youth development to education; culture building to social media; and so-forth. These can be formal and informal; charitable and profiteering; individual and corporate. **Public resources** are the money, time, property, facilities, equipment, and supplies of any level of government. **Private resources** are nearly identical, but come from profit-focused non-governmental places, including sole proprietor businesses, corporations, individual donors, philanthropic foundations, and so on.

Just because nonprofits, businesses and governments are operating in a relationship doesn't mean they are sitting in a smoky backroom making deals, either: Instead, they are operating in seen and unseen ways that subsequently affect young people in a variety of ways that are both good and bad.

The relationships between nonprofits, government and businesses include subtle and overt interactions between:

- Laws, rules, policies and regulations;
- Products, programs, curricula, projects, plans and activities;
- Evaluations, assessments, analytics and oversight;
- Training, professional development, certifications, and degrees;
- Books, articles, reports, websites and blogs;
- Associations, affiliations, partnerships, coalitions, networks, districts and regions;
- Funds, sales, grants, allocations, set-asides, donations and foundation programs;
- Schools, faith communities, stores, factories, parks, and jails;
- And much, much more.

All of that is just *part* of the complexity of the youth-industrial complex!

## Why It Exists

Looking closer, we can see the youth-industrial complex is apparent among nonprofits, including community-based organizations and national nonprofits, as well as local coalitions and international networks; governments, including K-12 schools, higher education and agencies programs on the federal, state, county and local levels; and businesses including privately owned companies and transnational conglomerates, foundations and individual donors. There are other entities, too.

The relationships between these entities are driven by three elements, which are private resources, public resources and youth-serving activities. These elements are clear in the money



given, the money spent and the money earned between governments, nonprofits and businesses. They become obvious when we see the leverage between the lobbying and bureaucracies that control sophisticated measures and contracts, which in turn go to private businesses that shift and transition youth culture and the social climate where it belongs. In the meantime, the same elements are apparent within the entire network of support for parents; opportunities of privileged young people and; the oppression of other children and youth. All of these rely on the ecosystem of nonprofits, governments and businesses in order to exist.

The youth-industrial complex exists to create, facilitate, habituate, perpetuate and encapsulate the lives of young people throughout our society. Whether it is beneficial or detrimental isn't the point of my analysis; the point is that it simply exists in myriad forms, driving the lives and outcomes of children, youth and adults throughout the world today.

## Where It Came From

With the advent of American corporate/consumerist culture and its dominance through globalization, it's important to recognize the reality of the youth-industrial complex didn't simply pop into existence one day, either. Instead, it has slowly come to exist over a century of increased interdependence between individual families, government social functioning and private commercial interests.

Somewhere within this entanglement emerged the fields of public health, education, youth development, public safety, parenting and family development, healthcare, and sustainability. At the same time, the establishment of manufactured and commercialized culture established the position of "youth" within our society, which didn't exist in prior centuries. Socializing, policing, education, environmentalism, empowerment, workforce development, culture building, civic governance, neighborhooding and volunteerism began interacting among themselves, and eventually became wholly entwined with commercial youth culture, which today includes music, clothes, hair styles and language, as well as social media, technological devices, connectivity and so much more.

As all of these functions were originally embedded as democratic in their nature: Intended to build the efficacy of democratic citizenship in democratic societies, it was seen as essential to heal the wounds young people faced, including ending forced child labor, stopping youth homelessness, defeating educational ignorance and demanding social justice for all young people, regardless of their identities and because of their belonging in the world.

In turn, this increased adults' intentions and deliberations about the status of youth, including who they are, what they do, where they are at and why they exist. The youth-industrial



complex became essential for determining what the answers to these questions are, how they are enacted, and whether they are successful.

However, what emerged was a crisis of purpose wherein so many activities became anti-democratic by forcing youth, either through legal compulsion, cultural tradition, family pressure or economic machinations, to become involved in them. In turn, succeeding generations of young people have become disengaged and disillusioned in the nature of much of society. While this was once seen as happening only to college-age students, it became the providence of high school students, and now has reached into elementary years. Jaded, life-weary children and youth are saturated by adult-devised, adult-implemented and adult-mandated activities throughout their young lives. This leaves young people at risk of becoming wholly divested in the democratic process while forming deeply disturbing attachments to the habits of consumerism, including accepting what's handed to them, accepting authority unquestioningly, and believing the mainstream social, cultural and economic narratives that dominate our society.

## Where It Is Going

The future of the youth-industrial complex is as intricate as the present reality of the situation, if not more so. There are political and economic forces which have realized the profit potential of every component of the Iron Triangle introduced above. Giroux and other scholars have deftly diagnosed and analyzed the indisputable role of neoliberalism within and throughout the youth-industrial complex. The continuing rise of neoliberal youth services in all functions of society seems inevitable and nearly unstoppable; presenting itself as the engine for all innovation, youth services have been reduced from their essential roles in building democratic society to become mere profit centers responsible for ensuring successful consumers.

This positioning has established a battle between the forces of crass capitalism and socially-minded community-builders. This is not a false dichotomy; instead, its inherent and apparent in the positioning of youth throughout our society. While crass consumerism insists that youth simply arrive, partake of pre-determined activities, products and services, and then complete their terms as adults-in-the-making, socially-minded community-builders reposition young people as active co-creators throughout society who live in interdependent cultures supporting and sustaining their personal and collective possibilities, potential and powers as members of the greater communities which we all belong to.

The future of the youth-industrial complex is mired in this battle, positioning all nonprofits, all levels of governments, and all businesses as the beneficiaries of the dichotomous relationship they have with young people everywhere, all the time. This isn't a conspiratorial relationship



either; instead, it is largely coincidental and circumstantial. However, the coincidences and circumstances are nearly always present and affect every single person in our society today.

## What We Can Do

Youth workers, teachers, businesspeople, doctors, organization administrators, elected officials, government workers, mental health counselors, police and store staff all have to determine for themselves where, when, why, how and when they interact, benefit and critique the complex.

However, it is youth themselves who offer the greatest possibility for challenging and defeating the invariably nefarious outcomes of youth-industrial complex. Rachel Jackson was a youth organizer fighting against the school-to-prison pipeline in California when she said,

*“Our youth are not failing the system; the system is failing our youth.  
Ironically, the very youth who are being treated the worst are the young  
people who are going to lead us out of this nightmare.”*

These prophetic words demonstrate the greatest hope our society has in this battle for the souls, hearts, minds and hands that can build, recreate, transform and critique democracy today and in the future. Youth are our only hope. Let's see that and work from that place, now and forever more.

## About the Author

Adam Fletcher is the founder and director of the Freechild Institute on Youth Engagement. With 15 years of experience working in nonprofits and governments focused on youth services and K-12 education before 2000, he has been an organizational consultant for the last 20 years. He has written more than 50 publications, including academic journal articles, peer-reviewed chapters, guides and handbooks. Adam lives in Olympia, Washington with his daughter, a cat and a dog.